

3 MASTERING THE SOFT SKILLS OF LEADERSHIP

Active Listening

Team Review

How have you shown empathy in your interactions with others over the past week?

Assess

What leader in your life demonstrates effective listening skills, and how does that kind of listening affect your relationship?

Insights and Ideas

There are different types of listeners. Some people are cafeteria-style listeners. They treat listening like a cafeteria line where they choose *this* but ignore *that*.

Others are informational listeners. They tune in to learn or acquire facts and knowledge.

Then there are critical listeners. They listen to form judgments and make critiques.

However, the most effective listeners are active listeners. James Hunter, author of *The Servant*, observes, "Active listening is attempting to see things as the speaker sees them and attempting to feel things as the speaker feels them."

Proverbs 18:13 warns, "To answer before listening — that is folly and shame." To become an active listener, focus on *being interested* more than *being interesting*. This happens as you put into practice four dimensions of listening.

1. **Listen with your ears.** Leaders who practice active listening pay careful attention to what's being said. They don't listen to respond, but to understand.
2. **Listen with your eyes.** Listening leaders focus their attention on the person speaking. They understand that eye contact improves focus and gives them the ability to connect with others.
3. **Listen with your heart.** Active listening isn't simply a matter of words. It's closely linked to feelings. It involves empathy, compassion, and genuine care for others. Active listening makes it possible to connect with another person's heart.
4. **Listen with your body language.** Active listeners look interested. They lean in to what others are saying. Their body language communicates value for the other person.

Billy Graham once said, "A suffering person does not need a lecture; he needs a listener." To improve your leadership, develop the soft skill of active listening. It will make all the difference when it comes to connecting with people.

Reflect and Discuss

1. Why is it sometimes hard for leaders to listen?
2. How does being *interested* matter more in leadership than being *interesting*?
3. Which of the four expressions of active listening would help you improve your listening?

Apply

Ask a trusted leader to rate you on a scale from 1 to 10 in the four expressions of active listening. Don't get defensive. Instead, pay attention, take notes, and then ask how you could improve. Openness to feedback is critical for growth. This process will also help you practice active listening.

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Interpersonal Communication

Team Review

What did you learn through feedback about your listening skills?

Assess

What do you think are the greatest keys to effective interpersonal communication?

Insights and Ideas

Every interaction with others requires interpersonal skills. Without these skills, you risk damaging the relationship and limiting its depth and potential.

Author John Kotter observed, "Communication comes in both words and deeds. The latter is generally the most powerful form." Effective interpersonal communication pays attention to what's said, how it's said, and the unspoken cues embedded in the interaction.

Each lesson we've covered up until now contributes to interpersonal communication. Emotional intelligence, empathy, and active listening are game changers in how we connect with people. In addition, these six practices will make a world of difference.

1. **Authenticity: Be real.** You cannot build healthy connections on a false veneer of hypocrisy. Fakes and facades don't build enduring trust or firm foundations for long-term relationships. You must start with authenticity.
2. **Dignity: Be respectful.** People want to be treated with respect. Remember that God's image is stamped on every person with whom you interact (Genesis 1:26–27). Devaluing people is an affront to the image of God.
Treating people with dignity gives you moral authority. Devaluing others kicks the legs out from under your interpersonal communication.
3. **Presence: Be engaged.** Effective interpersonal communication requires being fully present. When you're distracted or disengaged, you send a message to the other person that he or she doesn't matter. Be present.
4. **Dialogue: Be balanced. Make space for two-way communication.** Resist the urge to talk over others. Above all, work hard to be *interested* instead of *interesting*.
Don't show off or dominate the conversation. Instead, show interest in what the other person has to say by asking questions and listening intently.
5. **Clarity: Be concise.** Blood pressure increases when clarity decreases. You are responsible for communicating clearly and concisely. If your words create confusion, uncertainty, or an endless cycle of rambling, you're doing more harm than good to the relationship.
6. **Grace: Be kind.** Colossians 4:6 says, "Let your conversation be always full of grace." I often remind leaders to speak the truth in the tone of grace. Being harsh only undermines communication efforts.

These six practices will bolster your interpersonal communication and help you become more relationally engaged.

Reflect and Discuss

1. What does a good conversationalist do?
2. How have you seen the six qualities above make a difference in effective interpersonal communication?
3. Which communication attribute would you most like to improve?

Apply

On a scale from 1 to 10, grade yourself in each of the six attributes. Then identify the lowest score and ask someone who is strong in that area how you can improve. Use that feedback to create a plan for strengthening your interpersonal communication.